

Skills Insights Report

ApprenticeshipsNI in Construction
(Carpentry and Joinery)

June 2025



Education and
Training Inspectorate
Empowering Improvement

Contents

Introduction	1
Background information	1
Policy context	1
Skills landscape	1
Training provision	2
Views of learners, staff and stakeholders.....	3
Key findings and challenges.....	4
Recruitment trends and implications.....	4
Curriculum and qualifications.....	5
Learning and development	7
Skills and capabilities.....	8
Achievement and progression	9
Practice which can be shared more widely	10
Going forward.....	10
Appendix 1: Occupancy for Construction and Construction Crafts (Carpentry and Joinery) by Training Provider	12
Appendix 2: Notes	13
Appendix 3: Quantitative Terms	14

Throughout this report, where text is accompanied by an asterisk *, this indicates that additional information can be found in Appendix 2: Notes.

Introduction

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is committed to being the voice for equity and excellence for all learners by identifying and reporting on impactful practice and empowering improvement through enhanced professional dialogue with leaders and staff.

This Skills Insights Report highlights key findings and challenges from work undertaken by ETI for the Department for the Economy (DfE) relating to apprenticeships in the professional and technical area of construction (carpentry and joinery).

The report draws together the inspection findings for construction from four training organisation inspections, over the period November 2023 to March 2025, along with subject specialist visits to three training organisations and two further education colleges during April 2025.

Background information

Policy context

The ApprenticeshipsNI programme is strategically important in supporting DfE to realise its economic vision to create good jobs; promote regional balance; raise productivity; and reduce carbon emissions.

DfE's strategy for apprenticeships, [Securing our Success: The Northern Ireland Strategy on Apprenticeship \(2014\)](#), highlights the importance of upskilling to raise productivity, increase social inclusion, and help Northern Ireland to compete in the global marketplace. The strategy sets out 20 policy commitments within four strategic themes in order to develop an employment and learning system that is adaptive to the needs of employers; increases participation of employers and apprentices; builds engagement and partnerships with key stakeholders to support successful apprenticeships systems; and maintains a focus on delivery of high-quality apprenticeships.

Skills landscape

The [Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2023-33](#) identifies construction as the fourth highest quantum of jobs aligned to increased spending through [City and Growth Deals](#) commitments, the significant investment by government in the building of new housing and wider infrastructure needs. Under the high-growth scenario forecasted,

the number of construction workers will need to grow by 1.6% over the period 2023-2033; equating to a further 9,130 jobs. Just over one-third (37%, 3,330) of these will be required for the construction of buildings. Carpenters and joiners are expected to become the thirteenth largest occupation over the decade.

The construction industry in Northern Ireland has 5,920 employers, which is 15% of all employers in the region. [Construction Industry Training Board's Labour Market intelligence report for Northern Ireland 2024-2028](#) also predicts growth in Northern Ireland's construction sector at an annual rate of 1.6% over the period 2024 to 2028, requiring an additional 5,200 workers by 2028 across all construction professional and technical areas. Carpenters and joiners are in the top three occupations with the strongest additional recruitment requirement levels. The annual recruitment requirement for carpenters and joiners is set to average 200 per year.

The report, '[The Skills Construction Needs: Five Year Outlook 2023-2027](#)' highlights that in 2022, Northern Ireland had seen a strong increase in construction job vacancies, with companies having difficulty in finding suitably skilled workers. This has led to skills shortages being reported over a range of occupations and wage rates increasing as companies look to attract workers; the Construction Skills Network expects the labour market to be highly competitive for the foreseeable future.

Training provision

The [CEF Construction Survey](#), January 2025, lists the four top training-related priorities that were identified by the industry, namely:

- attracting new entrants by promoting construction careers in schools and communities;
- identifying skills needs and providing specific training tailored to the industry;
- development of entry-level skills programmes; and
- enhancing the understanding of the routes into the construction industry.

A recent DfE [ApprenticeshipsNI Statistical Bulletin](#) (January 2025) indicates that recruitment overall to ApprenticeshipsNI has increased by 71% over the period 2019/20 to 2023/24, with a total of 7,608 starts in 2023/24. Of these, 1,508 (20% of all starts) commenced apprenticeships in construction trades: 64% (971) at Level 2, 3% (43) at Level 2/3 and 33% (494) at Level 3.

According to further DfE data (January 2025), there are around 1,092 carpentry and joinery apprenticeships across the Level 2 (682) and Level 3 (410) ApprenticeshipsNI programmes, representing almost three-quarters (72%) of the total starts to construction trades.

Currently all six of Northern Ireland's further education colleges provide apprenticeship training in carpentry and joinery, along with nine of DfE's contracted training provider organisations (training organisations) (see Appendix 1). Three of the further education colleges provide almost 60% (644 apprentices) of the training for carpentry and joinery, with the remainder of the apprentices spread across the other three further education colleges and nine training organisations. The numbers of apprentices registered in two of the further education colleges and seven training organisations are comparatively low, ranging from 1 to 53.

Almost all (99%) of the apprentices are male, reflecting traditional recruitment patterns.

Views of learners, staff and stakeholders

During ETI's subject specialist visits, inspectors met and spoke with a sample of carpentry and joinery apprentices in focus groups.

The apprentices spoke highly of the support from the lecturers/tutors and the high standard of skills training they receive. A majority of the apprentices were able to articulate clearly the attitudes and aptitudes they need to perform well in their job role. Most of the apprentices were unclear of the progress they were making in their units. While the apprentices were aware of the progression opportunity from Level 2 to Level 3 within the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, they would like further information on the wider range of progression pathways available to them.

In discussions with staff from the organisations included in the subject specialist visits, it was reported that they have difficulty in recruiting carpentry and joinery lecturers/tutors and that this has impacted on their ability to recruit more apprentices.

The organisations commented positively on the introduction of the all-age apprenticeship in September 2023, which has enabled access to apprenticeship training for over 25-year-olds, with a small number to date registering on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme in this occupational area.

Inspectors also met with employers who reported that there is good communication between them and the further education colleges and training organisations providing the apprenticeship training. Communication is open and the employers value the opportunities to input into the regular reviews of their apprentices' progress. Most of them reported that they have skills shortages and that it is difficult to recruit apprentices with the right attitudes and aptitudes for work. They cited weak employability skills such as lack of a work ethic, low attendance and poor punctuality for not recruiting or retaining some apprentices. The employers also commented on and acknowledged the need for the apprentices to undertake literacy and numeracy qualifications for them to progress successfully to higher level education programmes. A few of them stated that the provision could be improved if there was a greater emphasis on the development of the apprentices' basic practical skills at the early stages of the apprenticeships, to enable more independent working. A small number of employers queried the relevance of some parts of the curriculum such as restringing sash windows, reflecting broader concerns about aspects of the apprenticeship training not being aligned well enough to contemporary practices.

Discussions were also held with the Construction Industry Training Board NI (CITB) and Construction Futures. The organisations invest heavily in promoting construction careers to the public and young people through, for example, school visits and extensive careers resources accessible through their website. CITB developed and provide a free textbook for pupils undertaking the GCSE in construction and supports a forum for teachers delivering the qualification to come together to share and develop resources. Concern was expressed about the skill shortages in the sector and the difficulty in recruiting lecturers/tutors to expand the provision of training due to the high salaries available in the industry.

Key findings and challenges

Recruitment trends and implications

- Overall, recruitment levels of apprentices to carpentry and joinery apprenticeships appear to be keeping pace with labour market needs. The current occupancy level of around 1,100 carpentry and joinery apprentices, along with the recent overall growth in ApprenticeshipsNI starts, suggests that the number apprentices being trained is broadly in line with the industry's need of 200 new entrants annually. However, the low apprentice retention rate and the alternative progression pathways from apprenticeship programmes result in a much lower number of apprentices, than those initially recruited, contributing to workforce planning needs in this area.

- It is of note that recruitment patterns show that almost twice as many construction apprentices commence training at Level 2 compared to Level 3. The Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2023-33 highlights a general oversupply in the labour market of qualifiers at Level 2 and an undersupply at Levels 3 to 5, with job opportunities at Level 2 being easier to fill through, for example, the economically inactive, unemployed or job-to-job moves. Analysis shows that construction is included in the areas with the largest undersupply in the labour market at Level 4-5. This highlights the continued need to re-balance the number of apprentices commencing apprenticeships at Level 2 compared to Level 3, with clear progression opportunities and pathways to Level 4-5 and beyond.
- Women continue to make up only 1% of the construction apprentices recruited. The evidence shows clearly that still too few women are taking up apprenticeship training in this economically important area, highlighting the continued need for key stakeholders, including schools, to promote career opportunities for women in this occupational area.
- The most common age group for apprentice starts continues to be the 16 to 19 age range.
- Recruitment patterns to carpentry and joinery apprenticeship vary significantly across the six further education colleges and the nine training organisations, highlighting regional imbalance in this occupational area. Continued monitoring of recruitment patterns is necessary, especially across the further education colleges, to ensure progression opportunities from post-primary education to apprenticeships in carpentry and joinery are equitable and balanced, in line with workforce skills needs and opportunities, across Northern Ireland.

Curriculum and qualifications

- In the further education colleges, extensive collaboration through the sector's Curriculum Hub for construction and the built environment has resulted in reform of the Level 2 curriculum, and similar reform of the Level 3 curriculum is ongoing. A new Level 2 diploma, which combines site and bench joinery, underpinning knowledge and occupational competencies within one qualification, has been introduced across all the colleges.
- The Level 3 qualification framework still follows the established separate site and bench pathways along with separate qualifications for occupational competencies - an NVQ* award. As a result, progression from Level 2 to Level 3 qualifications is no longer seamless, requiring bridging units to be

delivered, including the Level 2 NVQ. One further education college has made the decision to revert to the previous qualification framework, citing concerns around the lack of resources to support the delivery of the new diploma qualification, the portability of the qualification globally and the lack of recognition by the industry of the new qualification. It is, therefore, important that this issue is monitored closely and resolved at a strategic level to ensure that apprentices' progression in their learning is not disrupted unduly.

- The further education colleges and training organisations collaborate extensively with employer working groups, local councils, labour market partnerships and the CITB to identify skills gaps and inform curriculum provision.
- New technology in construction is creating a need to update and enhance the curriculum to provide carpentry and joinery apprentices with opportunities to experience and develop their knowledge and understanding of contemporary construction techniques. These include 3D printing, digital construction techniques, pre-fabrication, and integration of smart home features.
- There are examples in the further education colleges of the effective use of project-based learning by the apprentices to support their development of wider occupational and transversal skills. These include, for example, making working guitars using computer numerical control (CNC) machines and building large scale sets for the media and performing arts school. These opportunities serve to enhance the apprentices' transferable skills of teamwork, creativity, problem solving and social interaction, which are skills in demand by employers.
- In most of the organisations delivering carpentry and joinery apprenticeships, there are well-resourced, contemporary, industry-standard training facilities, providing the apprentices with a well-balanced blend of practical and theory training to develop their technical skills and underpinning knowledge to the breadth, depth and standard required by employers. Apprentices have structured work-based learning opportunities with supportive mentoring, and planned opportunities are available to experience and practise a varied range of occupational tasks, enabling them to apply and consolidate their learning. In a small number of the training organisations, the directed training facilities are cramped and not conducive enough to high-quality learning and training, impacting adversely on the quality of the learning experiences for the apprentices.

- There is undue variation in the frequency and length of the directed training time provided for apprentices across the further education colleges and training organisations, ranging from two days per week to one session per month. In those organisations where training is less frequent, further refinement of the delivery model is required to ensure that the directed training is adequately prioritised and consistently of a high quality with adequate stretch and challenge, within an appropriate length of training time.
- The apprentices reported good awareness of the essential skills as an integral component of their apprenticeship programme and how they support their progression to Level 3 and beyond. The apprentices reported positively on their experiences of essential skills and they value highly the small group approaches and one-to-one support provided by the lecturers/tutors.
- Organisations reported an increasing difficulty in the recruitment and retention of lecturers/tutors with the necessary contemporary skills, qualifications, knowledge and experience. This is reported as impacting negatively on the organisations' ability to increase recruitment levels to the apprenticeship programme.

Learning and development

- The key characteristics of the effective directed training sessions observed included well-structured and purposeful activities differentiated to meet the needs of the apprentices, underpinned by an appropriate level of stretch and challenge. Most of them engaged well in their learning, with a range of well-planned opportunities for them to work independently, in pairs and in groups. The learning was linked well to the skills and work practices associated with their workplace. A well-balanced learning programme of theory and practical sessions optimised learner engagement, with active learning approaches used effectively to develop the apprentices' thinking and problem-solving skills.
- In a small number of the training organisations, the directed training time provided for the apprentices is insufficient. As a result, not all the apprentices are well enough supported to acquire occupational skills at an appropriate pace. They do not have adequate opportunities to develop and consolidate a broad range of skills along with the associated underpinning knowledge, particularly to support their progression and achievement at Level 3.

- The apprentices in the further education colleges have good opportunities to participate in inter-campus and regional SkillBuild competitions, which they do with good levels of success. For example, two apprentices won bronze at the UK National Final 2024 and one apprentice achieved a Medallion for Excellence for Cabinetmaking at WorldSkills in Lyon in September 2024. These apprentices acquire and apply higher level skills, are highly motivated and act as good role models to other apprentices. Only some initial work, however, has been undertaken in a small number of the training organisations to support apprentices participate in skills competitions. Going forward, training organisations should seek opportunities for their apprentices to engage in skills competitions to raise standards.

Skills and capabilities

- Most of the apprentices' practical work is to an appropriate industry standard. They are developing well their occupational skills, at an appropriate pace, through a range of complex joinery tasks such as assembling and fitting staircases, constructing roofs, setting out and cutting apertures by hand. The apprentices are proficient in the use of machine and portable power tools and in two manufacturing companies, for example, they are working from complex CAD drawings. Most of the apprentices are developing well their skills in costing and estimating.
- Across the provision, the development of the apprentices' transversal skills is a key strength. Almost all the apprentices increase their levels of self-confidence and motivation and demonstrate positive attitudes to work through the range of learning and development opportunities provided by the apprenticeship programme. Most of them are increasingly able to work independently, take increased responsibility for their own learning, and can discuss and explain well the work they do both in the directed training workshops and in their job role. Most can articulate the personal and occupational skills required to be successful as a carpenter or joiner and develop a high level of professionalism in their work. This often includes enhanced resilience, for example, through travelling long distances as part of their work.
- Most of the apprentices can present information clearly in a variety of forms. On occasions, however, the apprentices' written work requires improvement. Written responses can be too brief with limited evidence of a deeper understanding of key concepts and extended learning. More needs to be done to support these apprentices engage better in independent writing to prepare them for progression to Level 3 apprenticeships or to other higher level education programmes.

- The use of assessment e-portfolios is underdeveloped: wider inspection evidence shows that the use of e-portfolios can be motivational for apprentices and a useful assessment tracking and monitoring tool for the apprentices, lecturers/tutors and employers. Where an e-portfolio was being used, however, a minority of the apprentices did not take sufficient responsibility and ownership of their e-portfolio.

Achievement and progression

- According to the global figures supplied by the Department, on average, only half (50%) of the apprentices who left the construction apprenticeship programmes, including carpentry and joinery, over the period 2021/22 and 2022/23, achieved fully their apprenticeship framework qualifications. This figure is too low and represents lost progression potential for those who didn't complete successfully their training. It is imperative that quality improvement strategies, at all levels, address robustly the causes of this low outcome.
- Using the carpentry and joinery data supplied by a sample of organisations for the period 2021/22 and 2022/23, a majority (64%) of the Level 2 apprentices who left achieved fully their apprenticeship framework qualifications, with a majority (62%) of them progressing to a Level 3 apprenticeship. This data equates to just under 4 in 10 of the original cohort of Level 2 apprentices progressing to Level 3. This highlights the stubborn challenge of increasing the skills levels of qualifiers and thereby potentially improving productivity levels in the Northern Ireland economy.
- Over the same period, most (78%) of the Level 3 apprentices who left achieved a full apprenticeship qualification, with almost all (93%) of them sustaining employment. However, none of the apprentices progressed to higher-level education programmes. This lack of upward progression highlights the limited progression opportunities for craft apprentices to higher professional and technical roles within the construction industry.
- The low attainment levels in the essential skills, in a minority of the organisations, contribute to apprentices not attaining their full apprenticeship qualification and progressing to higher-level training.
- Reasons cited for apprentices not progressing to Level 3 apprenticeship included the relatively low apprenticeship wages paid by employers, personal pressures and lack of buy-in by employers to release the apprentices for directed training, particularly for the associated essential skills. More needs to be done urgently, by all stakeholders, to incentivise and support apprentices to progress to Level 3 apprenticeships and beyond.

Practice which can be shared more widely

- In two of the manufacturing employers, the development of the apprentices' skills is being managed well through an in-house training academy with a dedicated mentor to support their work on live industrial projects. The workshops are very well equipped, and the digital skills of the apprentices are being developed by the use of a computer-aided design interface to access drawings and specifications.
- In one training organisation, there is an embedded culture of high expectations and aspiration instilled in the apprentices that promotes well their personal, social and professional development. As a result, there is a high rate of progression of carpentry and joinery Skills for Life and Work learners to the ApprenticeshipsNI programme at Levels 2 and 3. The apprentices understand and demonstrate the necessary skills to progress successfully to their chosen career pathway including: a strong work ethic; a willingness to learn; take responsibility for their own development; show initiative; and develop high standards of professional and technical skills and positive attitudes to work.

Going forward

Overall, the carpentry and joinery apprenticeship programmes are mostly effective in meeting the needs of apprentices and employers. The apprentices develop the necessary occupational and transversal skills to perform their work roles competently and confidently.

Most of the organisations providing carpentry and joinery apprenticeship programmes have well-established, purposeful, collaborative partnerships and links with a wide range of employers to support effective delivery. Their training facilities are well resourced with contemporary and industry-standard equipment and the apprentices are provided with a well-balanced blend of practical and theory training.

The apprenticeships in carpentry and joinery have the potential to contribute strongly to the Economy Minister's priorities of creating good jobs, promoting regional balance, raising productivity and reducing carbon emissions. There remain, however, some key challenges to address to ensure the provision is contributing fully to these economic priorities, which include:

- ensuring an appropriate level of regional balance in apprentice recruitment patterns, aligned to employment needs and opportunities within the construction industry across Northern Ireland;

- continuing to develop more impactful strategies to address the gender imbalance in construction apprenticeships;
- improving the proportion of apprentices who achieve their apprenticeship framework qualifications, especially at Level 2;
- increasing the proportion of Level 2 apprentices who progress to the Level 3 ApprenticeshipsNI programme and beyond; and
- reviewing the curriculum and qualification frameworks to ensure apprenticeship training remains relevant to industry's needs and enables apprentices to progress easily to higher level education or training programmes.

Appendix 1: Occupancy numbers for Construction and Construction Crafts (Carpentry and Joinery) by Training Organisations (January 2025)

College/Organisation	Occupancy number of Level 2 apprentices	Occupancy number of Level 2/3 and 3 apprentices	Total	Percentage of the total occupancy
21 Training Strabane	22	8	30	<5%
Belfast Metropolitan College	27	26	53	5%
Bryson Energy	0	9	9	<5%
Coalisland Training Services	<5	0	<5	-
Craft Training Ltd	61	35	96	9%
Dairy Farm & People 1st	10	9	19	<5%
Impact Training (NI) Ltd	7	<5	-	<5%
Northern Regional College	115	90	205	19%
North West Regional College	48	0	48	<5%
Rutledge Training	34	16	50	5%
South Eastern Regional College	115	73	188	17%
Springvale Learning	15	0	15	<5%
Southern Regional College	173	78	251	23%
South West College	51	41	92	8%
Workforce Training Services	<5	24	27	<5%
Total	682	410	1092	

Data provided by DfE, January 2025.

Appendix 2: Notes

Page 5

NVQ*

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are a 'competence-based' qualifications relating to occupational-specific skills and knowledge.

Appendix 3: Quantitative Terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%



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